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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000066

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#) [IZ](#)
SUBJECT: IRAQI REFUGEES: SARG BACKS UNHCR REGIONAL APPEAL,
BLASTS IRAQI GOVERNMENT

REF: A. DAMASCUS 57
[1](#)B. DAMASCUS 23

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter For Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Syrian Vice Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad used a UNHCR conference in Damascus to burnish the SARG's credentials in helping Iraqi refugees and to call on others, including the U.S. and Iraq, to do more. UN officials, though uncertain of the donor response to their ambitious response appeal, were pleased with Syria's expression of support. Meanwhile, the SARG has yet to grant visas to the next team of DHS circuit riders hoping to travel to Syria. END SUMMARY.

MIQDAD CRITICIZES IRAQI GOVERNMENT

[1](#)2. (SBU) Vice Foreign Minister Faisal al-Miqdad endorsed on January 18 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) 2010 regional appeal for Iraqi refugees, including a plea for \$166 million to fund activities in Syria. During his opening remarks at a conference organized by the UNHCR in Damascus to announce the regional appeal, Miqdad harshly criticized Baghdad for not doing enough to assist Iraqi refugees. "We find it strange that the Iraqi government is not doing its duty and is finding every way it can to avoid taking responsibility for its nationals," he said, terming the \$15 million the Iraqi government has provided the SARG for Iraqi refugees insufficient. Following his remarks, Miqdad told reporters he was "ashamed to discuss Iraqi support for refugees. We told their government that these nationals are Iraqis and they are suffering real, not imaginary, hardship."

[1](#)3. (SBU) Echoing SARG statements that Iraqi refugees in Syria would not be affected by tension between Damascus and Baghdad, Miqdad said the refugees would not be "a political casualty of the state of relations between Iraq and Syria." Stating that Syria is "already suffering from drought and other problems," Miqdad said it was unfair to expect Syria to bear most of the costs associated with Iraqi refugees. "Syria always said it was with the Iraqi people against terrorism, but the Iraqi government has to take its responsibility and not blame others," he concluded.

U.S. SHOULD DO MORE TOO

[1](#)4. (SBU) Miqdad praised President Obama for his plans to withdraw American troops from Iraq, but criticized the U.S. for taking in too small a number of Iraqi refugees. Miqdad claimed the U.S. had accepted only 3,000 Iraqis for resettlement in the U.S. (Note: In figures provided us on January 19, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimated that over 12,000 Iraqi refugees had arrived in the U.S. from Syria alone. End note). "Their (Iraqi refugees) asylum was and still is a matter caused by the U.S. occupation of Iraq," Miqdad stated.

IRAQI EMBASSY: "THIS IS MORE OF THE SAME"

15. (C) Iraqi embassy representatives were in the audience during Miqdad's remarks. Political Chief Berivan Dosky told us before the event the GOI had intended to provide more than the \$15 million it paid the SARG, but deteriorating bilateral relations intervened (ref A). "We are doing all we can to help Iraqi refugees, and we need cooperation from the Syrians and not accusations," she averred. Iraqi embassy media attache Ahmed Ubaid, who also attended Miqdad's speech, characterized SARG criticism of Iraqi efforts as "more of the same."

UNHCR GRATEFUL FOR SARG SUPPORT; ADMITS APPEAL AMOUNT IS "AMBITIOUS"

16. (C) UNHCR Deputy Country Representative Philippe Leclerc told us recently UNHCR is pleased by the SARG's endorsement of the regional appeal. "It means the Syrians are cooperating with us on the regional appeal, and that's something that we didn't always know would be the case," he said. UNHCR Country Representative Renata Dubini admitted the \$166 million figure for Syria was "ambitious," and that she was not certain the figure could be reached. "Right now we know we can count on over \$50 million," Dubini said.

17. (C) COMMENT: Like our Iraqi embassy colleagues, we have grown accustomed to hearing the SARG play up its support of Iraqi refugees, as Miqdad did with Staffdel Marcus (ref B), and denigrate Baghdad in the process. Damascus does indeed have a generally praiseworthy track record on this issue. Its

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affirmation of support for efforts under the UNHCR umbrella is a welcome development, though some NGOs were reportedly prevented from taking part in the regional appeal conference for reasons unknown. With regard to partnership with the U.S., however, the SARG's signals remain mixed as we await the granting of visas to all members of the current DHS circuit rider team scheduled to come to Syria later this month.

HUNTER